

French-born Theirry Omeyer is regarded as the best handball goalkeeper of all time. His career achievements are too many to list (they literally did not fit on our timeline!). Indeed, his whole career is a collection of highlights. He has won all major titles with the French National Team and treble titles with club THW Kiel, twice.

So remarkable is his talent that even within a team sport, he, as a single player, can be the difference between winning and losing. It's no wonder his teammates have nicknamed him 'The Wall'. But for Omeyer it's all about team work, both with his fellow players and medical professionals. Here, the Frenchman tells Nebojsa Popovic about the difference between being a good doctor and a great one.



What is handball to you?

First and foremost, handball is my passion and the sport I've been playing since I was a toddler. For me, it's a dynamic sport that gives me the opportunity to play in a team that allows me to experience the sharing and solidarity that can exist between teammates. I work myself to death for my own game, but also for the members of the team. It is team spirit that is the most important thing to me in handball.

In terms of the sport itself, it's a sport where you find dynamism, speed, strength and precision in movements like goalkeeper catches. In my opinion it is the perfect example of a modern sport that is great to watch.



CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

- 2012** Selected as Goalkeeper of IHF All Star team
- 2012** Won Olympic Games gold medal (France)
- 2011** Won World Championships (France)
- 2011** Won IHF Super Globe competition (THW Kiel)
- 2010** Won European Championships (France)
- 2009** Voted Player of the Tournament, World Championships (France)
- 2009** Won World Championships (France)
- 2008** Voted Player of the Year by the International Handball Federation
- 2008** Selected as Goalkeeper of IHF All Star team
- 2008** Won Olympic Games gold medal (France)
- 2006** Won European Championships (France)
- 2003** Won EHF Champions League (Montpellier)
- 2001** Won World Championships (France)
- 1999** Debut game for France

You have won an Olympic gold medal which is a privilege that only a limited amount of people ever get. What does it take to be an Olympic champion?

I have been lucky to win an Olympic Gold medal playing on the French National Team both at the 2008 Beijing Games and at the 2012 London Games. I cannot deny that it is a big deal. The Olympics occur only once every 4 years and we have won twice. Moreover we managed to defend our title won in Beijing. So with 2 gold medals it can definitely be said that we are fortunate.

But I also think we deserve the title of Olympic Champions because we worked really hard to win. It's a title that you win because behind the scenes in every training session you put in everything to



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Image: Omeyer stops the ball in front Spain's Viran Morros De Argila during France vs Spain at the Men's Handball World Championships, January, 2011, in Sweden.

win it. It's not just about being competitive during the 15 days of the Olympic Games. I think it is also our great frame of mind within the team that puts us above all other teams and the quality of our game put us in front at the Olympics.

Have you ever been injured during your career?

In my career I have not been injured a lot. When you are a goalkeeper the main area of injury is around the fingers and the hands. Ten years ago I had an open dislocation of the little finger and I had a sprained ankle. In May last year I had a contusion in the leg, in the calf, and it's something that bothered me for a little while. I had to play with pain, with my muscle tightening as soon as I did any intensive movements.

At the time when I had this injury I was playing for Kiel and we had to play the finals match of the Champion's League and the Olympic

Games were getting closer. I had to undergo a lot of treatment to be able to recover as quickly as possible. I also had to really listen to my body to make sure I didn't return to the field too early. It's always hard when you have a high stakes match to play.

After your years of experience playing at a professional level, what is your attitude to injury preventing exercises?

After years of experience playing handball I'm much more attentive to my body than I was 15 years ago. When you're 20 years old you naturally recover quite quickly. You don't really concern yourself too much with stretching or warming up. Today I'm 35 years old and I know that if I want to carry on playing for a few more years, these things are important. If I want to remain in shape I need to train much more than I did when I was in my early 20s. Before each training I take time to do particular warm-up exercises, a lot of



Left: Omeyer celebrates during THW Kiel vs Barcelona at the EHF Champions League semi final, April, 2008, Germany.

Down: Omeyer jumps during France vs Spain at the Men's Handball World Championships, January, 2011, Sweden.



stretching and a lot of limbering up because I'm aware that injuries can occur easier if you don't do an appropriate warm-up, especially in older players. Your body has to be ready to handle the work to be done during training or games.

What is your experience with a medical team and what is your opinion of its importance?

For me it is very important. In the French National team we have a travelling doctor with us at all times and we have two physiotherapists with us constantly. I think it is really important that the medical team remains the same.

I think consistency is important in a medical team. Our doctor has been with us for over 8 years and the physiotherapists for over 10 years. At one stage the Federation questioned whether we should keep the same physiotherapists or replace them each year and we, the players, requested to keep the same physiotherapists as we find that existing relationships with the medical team are important. They know us well after all these years of working together, they know our bodies and they know what kind of treatments we need. I need to trust my doctor and my physios to be able to confide in them and to share my feelings about any pain or injury I might have. I need to work with someone that I know, who I trust to make a good diagnosis. The existing relationship between the players and medical staff of the French National Team is quite intense. It's an

important relationship to ensure we all feel good and we all perform at our best level. In my opinion, teams and clubs should aim to hire people in these positions for the long term.

What qualities should a doctor have to be part of the team?

First and foremost he needs to have a human quality, to be approachable. It's very important for players to talk a lot, to exchange and communicate. Our team doctor comes around to each player individually during our warm-up sessions and checks in. He asks about our aches and pains and if there are any new injuries that may have occurred the previous day. He already knows that we have daily treatments with him but this extra interaction gives us the opportunity to communicate. He makes us feel like he is concerned about each one of us individually and that we can really exchange with him. Talking a lot is really important for building a strong relationship between the players and the doctor. Of course he needs to be good at his job of diagnosing and treating injuries, but a competent doctor can stand out if he is a good communicator.

Sometimes players like to celebrate and socialise together off the field. Do you think the team doctor should follow you or should he stay in the hotel?

I think it's important to have a culture of trust. We are all professional athletes and if we go out, we are mature enough to know our limits. Most of us are in our 30s and we've won our fair share of trophies so we're experienced enough to know how to celebrate responsibly. Also, many of us are husbands and fathers. The doctor is welcome to join us, of course, but he shouldn't come to play the cop. Most of the people working with the team work within this relationship of trust.



Image: Omeyer and Tunisian player Oussama Boughanmi, July, 2012, France.

You are fortunate to have never had to have surgery, but in preparation of the event ever happening, where would you prefer to undergo treatment, considering that you live outside of your home country?

Yes, luckily I have not had to undergo surgery but if I did, I would probably go back to France. It's not that I don't trust the medical system in Germany – there are good doctors everywhere – but I would mainly want to ensure that I fully understand what the doctor tells me about what he's going to do and to make sure that we can form a good relationship. Even though I speak fluent German I would be more comfortable speaking French when it came to medical issues and terminology. It's important for me to understand what the doctor will do, his process and the follow-up rehabilitation. Of course I would also ask the advice of the federation doctor to get his opinion.

Would you want your children to follow you into a career as a professional athlete?

I have two children: a 10-year-old daughter and a 2-year-old son. My daughter has started to play sports. I encourage her to practice but I let her do what she wants. She plays a bit of handball and swims a lot – she enjoys it and she's very keen. When she saw me play at the Olympic Games I think she definitely developed a longing to become a professional athlete but there's a big difference between longing for it and actually achieving it. I advise her to take her time and to enjoy it – that's the most important thing. Eventually, if she wants to and she has the aptitude to reach the level of a professional athlete, why not? Most importantly, though, I simply want her to play sport because it's important for the development of a child. But no pressure!

In professional sport, what percentage do you think is talent and what percentage is hard work?

I personally had to work really hard to reach where I am today but the actual percentage is hard to define because an athlete must

always have a proportion of talent. If you don't have talent, you can't reach a high level but to reach a high level, you need to work hard. If I had to I would say it's 30% talent and 70% work.

When I was young, I was talented but I was lacking in certain techniques like placing the ball. I drew on the advice of my coaches to improve my technique. Also, when I was young and playing in the Junior French National Team I was put on the bench for a while and I resolved to use my frustration at this to work even harder and prove that I deserved to be on the starting team.

A lot of people have talent but I think it comes down to your mind and whether you choose to be the one to work harder to be stronger than the others. When I was young there were a lot of people of my age who were really talented but I think I had a stronger mental capacity to work harder and was more driven to reach a higher level.

In 2015 Qatar will host the World Men's Handball Championship. What is your impression of the country?

I've been to Qatar twice and both times I've been really happy to be here and to see that handball is starting to take an important position here in Doha. Qatar will host the World Championship in 2015, the Qatar National Team will participate in the 2013 World Championship in Spain so it's a pleasure to see my sport, handball, develop outside of Europe. Nowadays, handball is everywhere in the world and it's a great thing and I hope it will keep growing.

*Nebojsa Popovic M.D., Ph.D.
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